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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001137

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: CHP'S EMBRACE GETS COLD SHOULDER IN
SOUTHEAST

REF: 2007 ANKARA 2834

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Kelly Degnan, for reasons 1.4
(b,d)

¶1. (U) This is a joint Embassy Ankara-Consulate Adana cable.

¶2. (C) SUMMARY. Republican People's Party (CHP) chairman Deniz Baykal traveled to Turkey's Kurdish southeast June 4-5 to deliver a message of understanding for the needs of the region's farmers and of pride in Turkey's ethnic diversity and richness. Party officials emphasize the symbolic gesture of holding CHP's executive committee meeting in Diyarbakir but remind that Baykal's words reiterate CHP's long-standing views. Some party insiders acknowledge, against a background of controversy and the 2007 elections, that CHP is wholly discredited in the southeast -- a view shared by Kurdish observers as well. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (SBU) Baykal's road show to the southeast included attending an agriculture and farmers' convention in the southeastern city of Sanliurfa, where he acknowledged the challenges faced by farmers and called for eliminating terrorism and replacing the atmosphere of tension and hostility with a culture of dialogue and mutual respect. He emphasized cultural identity as a question of individual dignity and a source of national richness. Baykal warned that Turkey is in the process of giving 27 EU member states the right to intervene in its destiny, implying that integrating Turkey from within was a necessary antecedent to integrating with Europe. Without referring to his Secretary General, Onder Sav, who has yet to apologize for comments viewed as insulting the Prophet Mohammed, Baykal stated that freedom of expression should take a backseat to sacred feelings, reminding his audience that CHP reacted strongly to Danish caricatures of the Prophet. CHP's June 5 executive committee meeting in Diyarbakir was the first such meeting in the southeast since 1994. Baykal's visit was marred by the tragic death of CHP's deputy youth branch chairman, Ersin Cildir, killed when the bus he was riding on top of went under an overpass; Baykal was criticized for pressing on with his trip.

¶4. (C) Commenting on Baykal's visit, Deputy Secretary General Algan Hacaloglu told us identity and economics fit together well; where there is political stability and self-confidence, capital follows. The key to addressing the southeast's cultural and economic needs is integration, he said,

asserting that CHP opposes assimilation; people should be free to develop their identities. While Baykal was greeted in Diyarbakir by citizens throwing eggs distributed by a local grocer -- according to Hacaloglu, a Turkish Hezbollah supporter, an organization he implied the US supports -- Hacaloglu characterized the welcome in Sanliurfa as warmer. "Diyarbakir is a politically-motivated city," he remarked. CHP's lone southeastern deputy, Turkish Alevi Sevkettin Kose of Adiyaman, could not identify for us a single concrete step that CHP should take to back up Baykal's words. Deputy Atilla Kart, a Kurd representing Konya, conceded the party's current mentality misses the point; its bureaucratic and "bone-like cadre" is out of touch with the people and has generated a crisis of confidence among the public. CHP has to woo the people back. Sinop deputy Engin Altay agreed that confidence is already lost; when Baykal went to embrace the people, they turned their backs to him.

15. (C) Kurdish intellectual Serafettin Elci, former cabinet member and currently head of a small federalist party (KADEP), explained that after years of anti-Kurdish rhetoric, it is impossible to take Baykal's nice words seriously. CHP has been rigid and hostile not only to Turkey's Kurds, but also to Northern Iraqi Kurds; Baykal's speech last fall (ref A) was not about improving relations with the government in Northern Iraq but rather about perpetuating existing policies. Describing Baykal as "an old friend," Elci asked whether Baykal would initiate any action on improved language rights, and if not, would he support those who did? Elci was skeptical.

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SE Welcoming but Skeptical

16. (SBU) Baykal's visit was the culmination of several months of behind-the-scenes outreach by CHP to respected people in the region. The outreach was dictated by the party's dismal results of the 2007 election, when CHP's vote collapsed in the southeast and much of central Anatolia, allowing AKP to boast (correctly) that it is the only party in Turkey with genuine national appeal. According to Altan Tan, a researcher and writer from Diyarbakir, CHP members were uninformed about Kurdish issues at a briefing he gave at CHP headquarters in 2007. Sezgin Tanrikulu, President of the Diyarbakir Bar Association, told us he has met with Baykal three times since January, including during Baykal's June visit, and sensed a change in Baykal's and CHP's views concerning the Kurdish issue. Tanrikulu said Baykal's statement may have been a recognition that his previously negative attitude about Kurdish cultural and linguistic rights and overall democratization in Turkey and his stance on EU accession have a detrimental effect on the country.

17. (C) Tan hopes Baykal's visit does not prove to be a one-off; if he repeats these messages in Ankara he could make a substantial difference because he has strong influence on the military, the judiciary and other conservative elements of the Turkish establishment. Writing in "Taraf" daily, influential columnist Ahmet Altan went even further, saying Baykal's remarks mark a turning point in respecting Turkey's multicultural identity, noting that Kurds will now be able to proudly say they are Kurds.

18. (C) Other contacts were far less charitable toward Baykal's speeches, saying his visit was crafted solely as a gambit to repair CHP's reputation in the region. Nurcan Baysal, leader of a development NGO, said, "No one believes he wants to solve the Kurdish problem. He is making political calculations. When politicians are in the southeast, they say one thing, when they go back to Ankara, they forget." Halil Balkan, the President of Sirnak's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said people do not care what Baykal said because they think he made the remarks to curry favor in advance of the March 2009 local elections.

19. (C) COMMENT: If Baykal is expecting to reap immediate political benefits from his trip to the southeast, he is likely to be disappointed; the region remains highly skeptical about CHP, which Kurds believe has been on the wrong side of the Kurdish issue in recent years. Asked about Baykal's visit, one uneducated Kurdish woman told a reporter, "You can't make bread with words." If Baykal wants to win over skeptics, he will need to let his words in Urfa guide his deeds in Ankara. One important act would be for CHP to support economic and social reforms under discussion in parliament and agree to meet with pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) members. CHP's new party program, which Hacıoğlu currently heads, will be another indicator of the party's commitment to reforms. END COMMENT.

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